

The Economy of Images & the Art-World / Hito Steyerl

HUMN2001/AHIS3600 – VIDEO LECTURE
M. Curtis Allen

Hito Steyerl: Overview

Hito Steyerl (1966 –)

- Hito Steyerl is a German filmmaker, artist, and thinker
- Known for work surrounding the confluence of digital and information technology, media infrastructures, the production of contemporary art, and their implication in circuits of financial speculation and global capitalism.



Hito Steyerl: Overview

Hito Steyerl (1966 –)

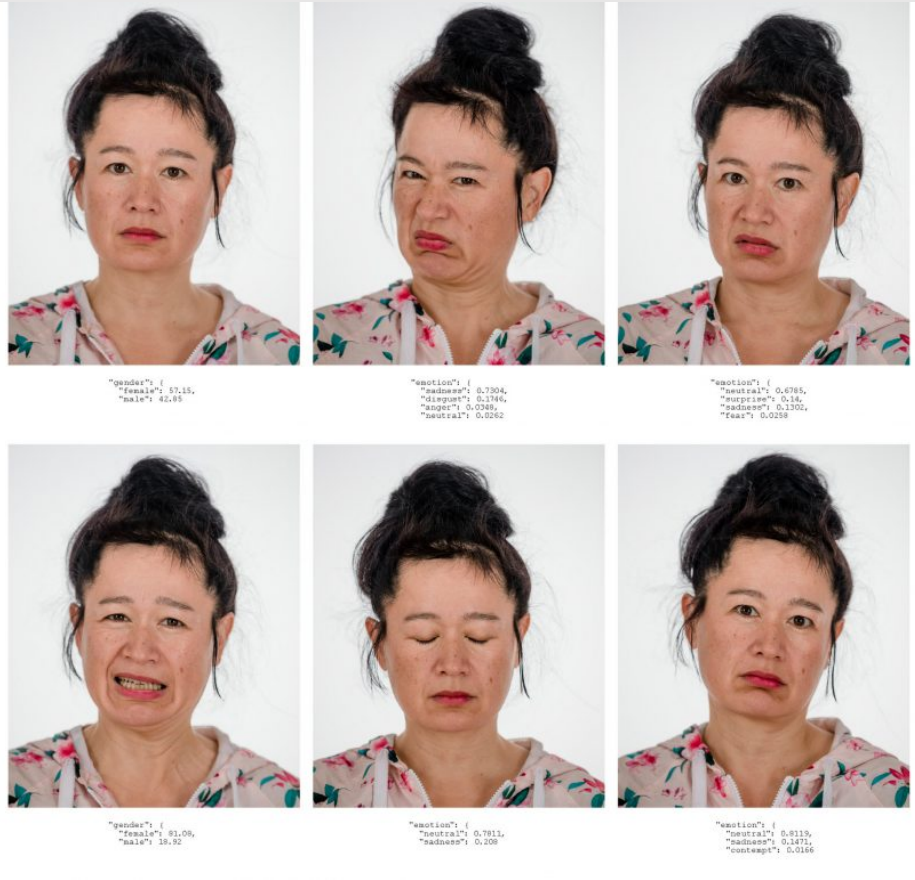
- Her artwork is now mostly circulated in major museum venues around the world, through sprawling and higher immersive video installations.
- Her essays and other writings appear in many contexts of contemporary art and leftist political theory journals and publishers.



Hito Steyerl: Overview

Hito Steyerl (1966 –)

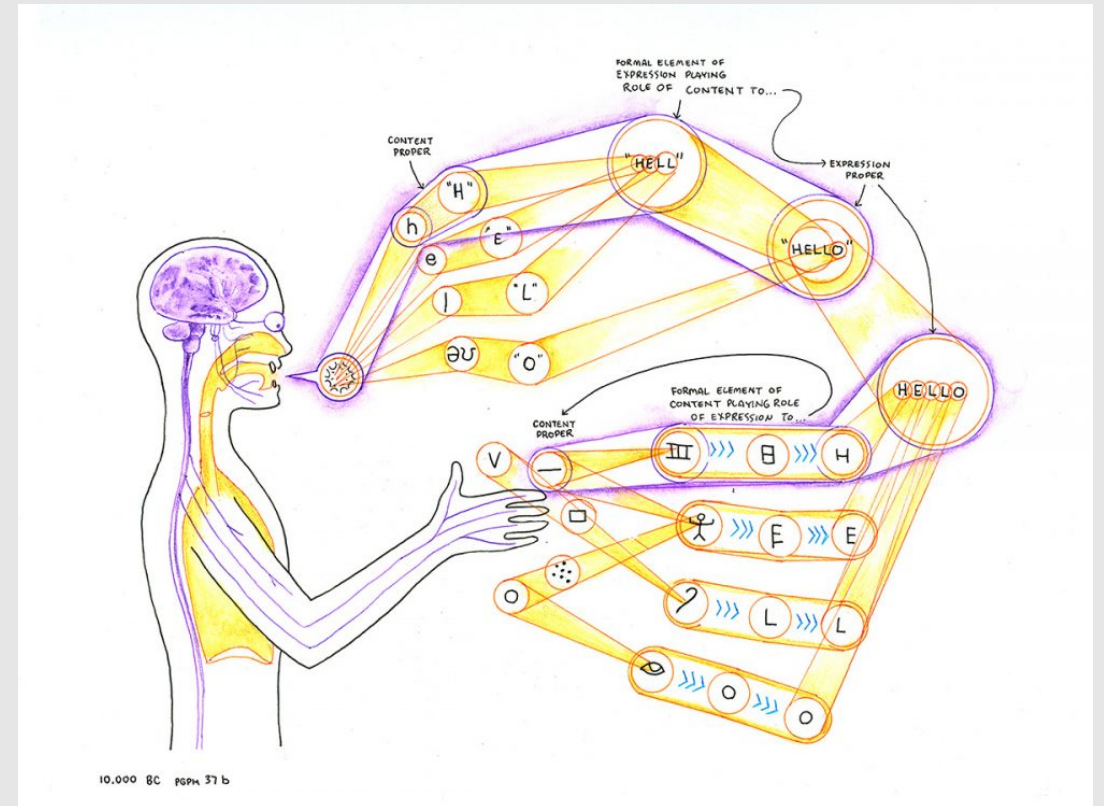
- She is a vociferous critique of the many of the economic and institutional practices surrounding contemporary visual high art and experimental filmmaking, while being an actor in that same domain.



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisted

Post-Structuralism

- 'Post-Structuralism' is a name invented by N. American scholars given to a loose group of French philosophers who came to attention in the late 1960s, and those whose work bears the influence of those philosophers.
- There is no overriding theoretical commitment or set of commitments that they all share, rather they share a set of related conceptual themes and theoretical interests and concerns, and many of them both took ideas from structuralism and provided various criticisms of structuralist theories.



Marc Mgui and Magda Wojtyra, "10,000 BC, Paragraph 37B" from *Drawing A Thousand Plateaus*,
<https://happysleepy.com/art/drawing-thousand-plateaus/10000-bc/>

Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisted

Post-Structuralism

- Some of those common themes included:
 - Non-totalizability.
 - Necessary fragmentariness, or disunity.
 - Lack of central meaning or authority.
 - Ungroundedness of meaning and language.
 - Interest in the effect of time, history, and power on social structures and meaning.
 - Relation of presence to absence.
 - Emphasizing difference over identity.
 - Marginality, and limit.
 - Critical of the 'subject'.

arbitrary.and.rejected.memes

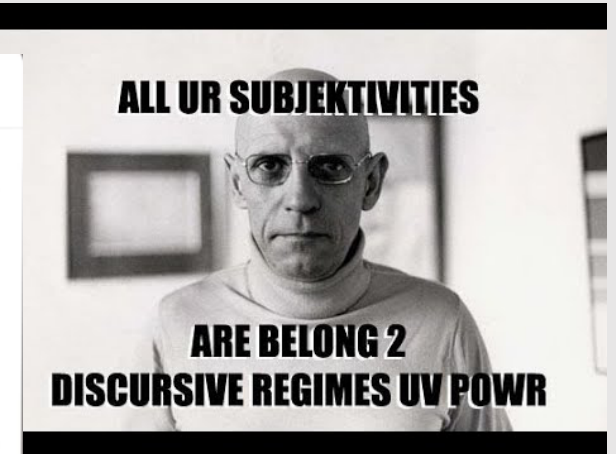


Stage One:
Initially, the sign (image or representation) is a reflection of basic reality.

Stage Two:
The sign masks a basic reality. The image becomes a distortion of reality.

Stage Three:
The sign marks the *absence* of basic reality. The image call into question what the reality is and if it even exists.

Stage Four:
The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Post-Structuralism

- Post-structuralist thinkers are also (partly responsible) for the theorization of the idea of postmodernism, in art and in history—notably in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.
- Thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in the 1970s and '80s were also influential in theorizing the new regimes of capitalism—exemplified by a decentered system of multinational corporations, global production, trade, and financial speculation—that came to typify what is now referred to as 'neo-liberalism'.



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Lyotard's 'Postmodern'

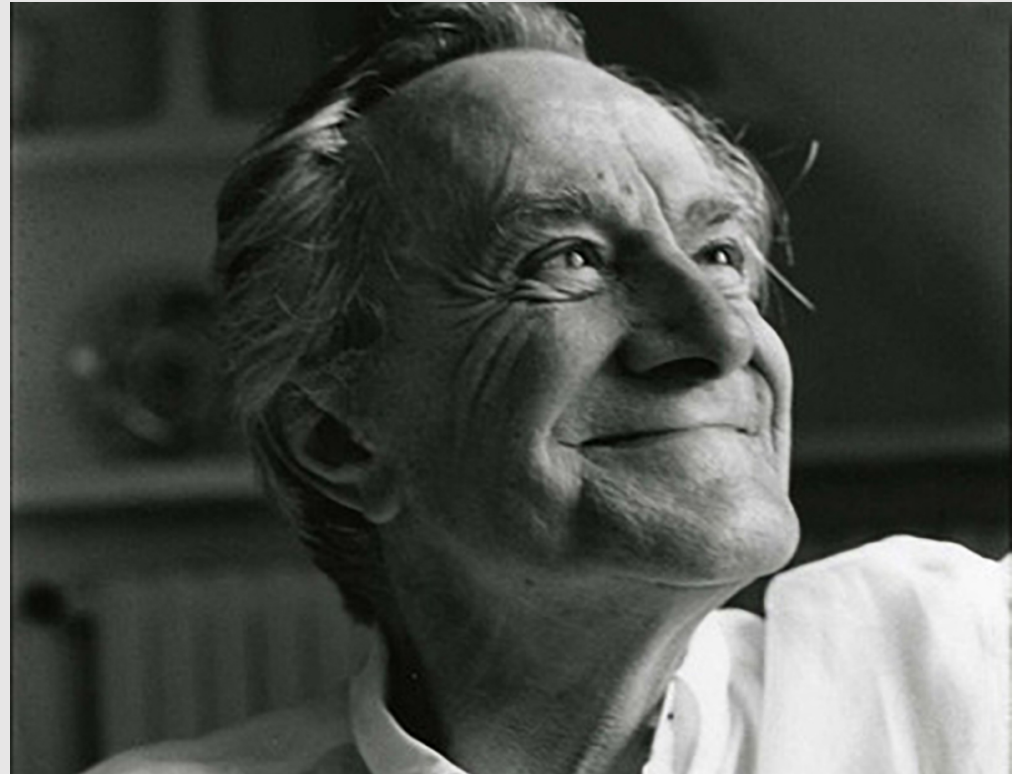
- For Lyotard, the postmodern signified the end of 'grand narratives' 'meta-narratives' or master narratives, which organized and oriented the practical and intellectual life of a societies— ideas like Progress, Modernity, Reason, Freedom, etc.
- This meant both the death of overarching systems of signification and meaning which cast their authority over everyone.
- But also, the necessary fragmentation, or shattering of meaning for collective human life. This also has dramatic consequences for the future models of selfhood, identity, and subjectivity.



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Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Lyotard's 'Postmodern'

“Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. [...] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. [...] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?”

(PMC, xxiv-xxv)

Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Deleuze & Guattari on 'Deterritorialization' and 'Flow'

- Deleuze and Guattari, notably in *A Thousand Plateaus*, developed two concepts, related to global capitalism, which are useful to have in the back of one's mind as we embark on reading Steyerl's texts:
 - Deterritorialization
 - Flow



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Deleuze & Guattari on 'Deterritorialization' and 'Flow'

- Deterritorialization
 - Def. 1: A process by which the elements of a system, organization, or 'assemblage' (political, cultural, biological, psychical, etc.) (i.e. a 'territory') become decoupled from their point of origin and put into new formations or organizations.
 - Def. 2: A process through which a stable order becomes un-moored and its constituents are enveloped in a process of transformation, re-ordering, re-coding (reterritorialization), or becoming.
 - Example: Globalization represents a general deterritorialization of pre-modern forms of life and political boundaries.



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Deleuze & Guattari on 'Deterritorialization' and 'Flow'

- Flows:
 - D&G argue that the operations of contemporary capitalism can best be understood, not as collection of static and fixed goods and services and the markets in which they are bought and sold, but rather as a circulating process in which what enter into a circuit are flows; a circulation through which value is generated, and the how we understand things, resources, machines, people, goods and services, are 'coded' relative to their role in these circuits and the speeds of circulation or exchange they enable, hinder, etc.
 - Example: automated computation (flows of data) enabled financial speculation on markets which were not possible before around 1970—in response, the money system (e.g. the gold standard) is 'decoded' and currency then gains its status relative exclusively to the exchange-rate with other currencies.



Postmodernism and 'Post-Structuralism' Revisited

Deleuze & Guattari on 'Deterritorialization' and 'Flow'

“Today we can depict an enormous, so-called stateless, monetary mass that circulates through foreign exchange and across borders, eluding control by the States, forming a multinational ecumenical organization, constituting a de facto supranational power untouched by governmental decisions.”

(ATP, 1987: 453)

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution... It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction” (Steyerl 2009, 1).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“[The poor image] often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright [...] It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all.” (Steyerl 2009, 1).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

"The contemporary hierarchy of images, however, is not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution." (Steyerl 2009, 2).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“Obviously, this condition is not only connected to the neoliberal restructuring of media production and digital technology; it also has to do with the post-socialist and postcolonial restructuring of nation states, their cultures, and their archives.” (Steyerl 2009, 6).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“Obviously, this condition is not only connected to the neoliberal restructuring of media production and digital technology; it also has to do with the post-socialist and postcolonial restructuring of nation states, their cultures, and their archives.” (Steyerl 2009, 6).

“As I once observed in the case of a film museum in Sarajevo, the national archive can find its next life in the form of a video-rental store. Pirate copies seep out of such archives through disorganized privatization. On the other hand, even the British Library sells off its contents online at astronomical prices.” (Ibid).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“From this perspective, the poor image reveals the decline and degradation of the film essay, or indeed any experimental and non-commercial cinema, which in many places was made possible because the production of culture was considered a task of the state. Privatization of media production gradually grew more important than state controlled/sponsored media production. But, on the other hand, the rampant privatization of intellectual content, along with online marketing and commodification, also enable piracy and appropriation; it gives rise to the circulation of poor images.” (Ibid.).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“The imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic

[...]

Like the economy of poor images, imperfect cinema diminishes the distinctions between author and audience and merges life and art. Most of all, its visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, and full of artifacts.” (Ibid).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“But the real and contemporary imperfect cinema is also much more ambivalent and affective than Espinosa had anticipated. On the one hand, the economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. But this does not mean that these opportunities are only used for progressive ends. Hate speech, spam, and other rubbish make their way through digital connections as well.” (Ibid).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“While the territory of poor images allows access to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques. While it enables the users’ active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images.” (Ibid).

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“This flattening-out of visual content [...] positions them within a general informational turn, within economies of knowledge that tear images and their captions out of context into the swirl of permanent capitalist deterritorialization.” (Ibid, 7).

“In a way, the poor image is subject to a similar tension [as the legacy of the ‘de-materialization’ of conceptual art]. On the one hand, it operates against the fetish value of high resolution. On the other hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.” (Ibid.)

Reading Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image"

“This ‘visual bond’ was, according to [Dziga] Vertov, supposed to link the workers of the world with each other. 17 He imagined a sort of communist, visual, Adamic language that could not only inform or entertain, but also organize its viewers. In a sense, his dream has come true, if mostly under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety.” (Ibid, 8).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“In practice though, art industries trigger trickle-up effects which are then flushed sideways into tax havens. Art’s economies divert investments from sustainable job creation, education, and research and externalize social cost and risk. They bleach neighborhoods, underpay, overrate, and peddle excruciating baloney.” (Steyerl 2016, 3).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“Contemporary art is just a hash for all that’s opaque, unintelligible, and unfair, for top-down class war and all-out inequality. It’s the tip of an iceberg acting as a spear.”
(Steyerl 2016, 3).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“If art is an alternative currency, its circulation also outlines an operational infrastructure. Could these structures be repossessed to work differently?

[...]

to expect any kind of progressive transformation to happen by itself – just because the infrastructure or technology exists – would be like expecting the internet to create socialism or automation to evenly benefit all humankind. The internet spawned Uber and Amazon, not the Paris Commune” (Ibid, 5).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“One of the first steps towards parallel art sectors would thus be to organize even partial sustainability in the absence of bubble liquidity and barely limited amounts of free labor. Whatever emerges will be a new version of art-affiliated autonomy. / In contrast to the modernist autonomy of art schemes, this autonomy is not solitary, unlinked, or isolated.” (Ibid).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“People are used to perceiving the art world as sponsored by states, foundations, patrons, and corporations. But the contrary applies at least equally well. Throughout history it has been artists and artworkers, more than any other actors, who have subsidized art production. 16 Most do so by concocting mixed-income schemes in which, simply speaking, some form of wage labor (or other income) funds art-making.” (Ibid, 6).

Reading Steyerl's "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!"

“Art’s organizing role in the value-process – long overlooked, downplayed, worshipped, or fucked – is at last becoming clear enough to approach, if not rationally, than perhaps realistically.

[...]

In short, the value is not in the product but in the network; not in gaming or predicting the market but in creating exchange. Most importantly, art is one of the few exchanges that derivative fascists don't control – yet. (Ibid, 6).